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**THE PSYCHOPEDAGOGICAL DIMENSION OF PROMOTING
TALENTS - AN OBSERVATIVE STUDY**

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Abstract

The psycho-pedagogical issue of talent promotion is a field of current interest for different categories of teachers, students preparing for the teaching career, counsellors, parents, pupils, decision-makers. Until recently, the general assumption assumed by most countries was that talented children have no special needs or difficulties in order to succeed in school and life. Talent nurturing and management became a challenge for teachers. Unfortunately, the support for initial and in-service teacher training for gifted education is yet insufficient. In this context, we consider it important to know the opinion of master candidates in the domain of educational sciences regarding the usefulness, content, strategies for stimulating/realizing talent promotion in the present Romanian school, as well as the causes that support or complicate these approaches. The present study was conducted in the second semester of the academic year 2017-2018. The research method was a questionnaire applied to 71 master candidates at the Innovative Strategies in Education master study programme from Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacău, Romania. The purpose of this observative study is to identify the master candidates' perception of this issue with a view to ensuring a higher convergence between their professional training interests and the content studied during the master program. The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the answers was relevant to the need for a minimal initial/continuous training in the psycho-pedagogy of high abilities (PPHA) for teachers.

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Keywords: Gifted/talented education, teacher training, teaching strategies, professional development.



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1. Introduction

The aim of meeting the educational and developmental needs of all students is generally claimed as a priority for educational national systems, educators and society collectively. This aim also addresses the specific needs of gifted students. Maximising these students' talent development is directly linked to the continued society prosperity and growth, which depends on the creative potential of its people. An education program specially designed for meeting these students' cognitive, emotional and social needs is very complex and challenging, due to the heterogeneity of talented population's characteristics. In all European countries, provisions for gifted and talented students across the entire educational system was heavily influenced by the political climate of the time. In Romania, since the Spiru Haret form of Education, started in 1898, educational policies reflected in educational Laws that included different issues addressing able pupils (Haret, 2012). Most of them are related to administrative measures, like the legal frame of organizing special programs or classes by academic subjects for pupils with above average school records. The incentives for international academic Olympiad winners, acceleration of studies (two school years during one year) or, early entry in the first school year, based on psychological evaluation of intellectual abilities (Cretu, 1995). The current Romanian Law of Education (Law no. 1/2011) has an entire article concerning the provisions for talented students from school: the National Centre for differentiated education (belongs to the National Ministry of Education); Non-formal programs (excellence centres, different competitions including the national academic Olympiads, summer camps, symposiums, etc.); grants; differentiated and personalised curriculum in schools (enrichment, mentoring, acceleration). Until recently, the general assumption informally assumed by most countries was that talented children have no special needs or difficulties in order to succeed in school and life. During the last decades there has been a gradual grow of interest on provisions for talented people, not only in schools but also in industrial companies. Talent nurturing and management became a challenge for those who see the linkage between people with high abilities and prosperity of societies. Unfortunately, the support for initial and in-service teacher training for gifted education is yet insufficient or neglected in this current challenging context.

2. Problem Statement

The European educational policies, including the Romanian case, have not enough specifications on teacher training for gifted and talented education, despite the research evidence on its high significance to the talented students' success in school and later, in their professional careers. Forster discusses the evidence that supports effective implementation of gifted and talented policy and provisions coming from both administrative and practitioner levels, where training and support for teachers is a vital aspect for effectively meeting the needs of gifted and talented students (Forster, 2005).

Educators who have participated in professional development programs on talented students have appropriate teaching skills, positive perceptions, attitudes and improved confidence in their ability to meet the needs of gifted and talented students, in contrast to those who have not engaged in any training in this area (Bangel, Moon, & Capobianco, 2010; Lassig, 2009).

A large-scale European wide research report was published by Monks and Pfluger (2005) which provides information about gifted education in 21 European countries. The report examines also the status and systems of teacher training in the field of gifted education.

The conducted research found out that only 9 out of 21 countries (Austria, Germany, Spain, Hungary, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovenia and the United Kingdom) provide some formal programs of teacher training in this field.

In June 2006, Eurydice launched a working document, Specific educational measures to promote all forms of giftedness in Europe. One chapter was dedicated to the situation of initial and in-service teacher training. The situation varies widely: in some countries, separate courses are devoted to the issue as a separate subject, while elsewhere it is integrated in other subjects, or no special related recommendations are drawn up because of the considerable autonomy granted to training institutions. Several countries have reported a growing interest on the part of teachers in gifted young people, and several legislative systems are being amended to offer gifted and talented pupils greater variety in educational provisions (Eurydice European Unit, 2006).

In an education policy focused research, Reid and Horváthová (2016) try to map and describe gifted education, teacher training programs and qualifications for teachers of intellectually gifted pupils in Slovakia, Austria, Belgium and Finland. The authors chose these countries because of very different perceptions of gifted education and teacher training. The article makes courageous recommendation for a sustainable European policy like the adoption of common terminology, understanding, principles and requirements concerning gifted education in Europe, including also, teacher training.

In Romania, there are few HE institutions which offer separate undergraduate or master courses in this field, like Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi (since 1992), Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava (since 2011) and recently, Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacau (since 2016).

Another report based on an international survey conducted by Freeman, Raffan and Warwick (2010), includes answers from over 850 international professional contacts from national and local levels across different continents. The main topics of the survey were cultural values underpinning programs, acceleration and enrichment, integration versus separation of provision, constraints faced by educators and practical solutions, links between identification, provision and success. All these topics are directly related to the teacher's abilities to understand the talented student's needs.

In general, little research has been conducted on how teacher training strategies could impact teachers' beliefs and teaching behaviour in order to meet the gifted student's needs. However, one strategy was found to be effective: encouraging students to make their attitudes and beliefs explicit so that their assumptions can be analysed (Correa, Hudson & Hayes, 2004; Miller, 2009). Baudson and Preckel (2016) found out that teachers considered gifted students more able, but less prosocial and more maladjusted than average-ability students. This finding reflects the process of stereotyping of gifted students by teachers, positively (seeing gifted students as superior in all respects) or negatively (*stigma of giftedness* which sees gifted students as intellectually strong, but emotionally and socially inferior).

3. Research Questions

The research questions (RQ) play a guiding role both for the purposes of our research and its design and achievement. For our study, these are:

- 3.1. RQ1 – Are the master students, in their capacity as teachers, familiar with the theoretical issues of psycho-pedagogical strategies for promoting gifted students?

3.2. RQ2 – Are the master students, in their capacity as teachers, familiar with the practical issues of psycho-pedagogical strategies for promoting gifted students?

3.2. RQ3 – Are the master students, in their capacity as teachers, familiar with the real, concrete contextual implementation of the psycho-pedagogical strategies for the promotion of gifted students in the Romanian educational system?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of our study is to investigate the master students' perception of different aspects of the implementation of psycho-pedagogical strategies for the promotion of gifted students.

4.1. Objectives

The *specific objectives* are: SO1 - exploring the master students' perception of the overall meaning of the concept; SO2 - highlighting the ways or activities to promote gifted students; SO3 - identifying the causes that prevent the implementation of gifted students promotion strategies at the level of Romanian education; SO4 - determining the master students' expectations regarding the course of Psycho-pedagogical Strategies for Promoting Talents

5. Research Methods

The dependent variable is represented by the concept of psycho-pedagogical strategies for the promotion of gifted students, which is concretized in the participants' response to characteristic aspects. The independent variables are: the level of education (preschool/primary/middle school/high school); professional experience (no professional experience/1-2 years/3-5 years/6-10 years/over 10 years); the environment in which they teach (urban/rural).

5.1. The research group

The study involved master students attending the study programme Innovative strategies in education from Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacău, all of them teachers at different levels of the education system (n=71). Based on the independent variables, the group is divided into different categories (Table 01).

Table 01. The distribution of participants according to the independent variables

No	Variable	Distribution
1.	level of education	30 pre-school teachers, 35 primary-school teachers, 3 middle-school teachers, 3 high-school teachers
2.	professional experience	9 with no professional experience, 7 with experience between 1 and 2 years, 6 with experience between 3 and 5 years, 10 with experience between 6 and 10 years, 39 with experience over 10 years
3.	the environment in which they teach	31 teach in the urban environment, 40 teach in the rural environment

5.2. Psycho-pedagogical research methods and techniques

The study relied on a questionnaire containing open and closed questions, built by following the steps mentioned in the literature (Labăr, 2008). The research aimed at identifying the master students' perception of different aspects of the implementation of psycho-pedagogical strategies for promoting gifted students. In preparing the questionnaire items there were analyzed and used a series of studies and research results in the domain of the psycho-pedagogy of highly-gifted children (PPHGC) (Crețu, 1997; Crețu, 1998). The master students have had the opportunity to express their opinion in detail by answering open questions. A group of experts, university professors, trainers with experience in the field of education sciences was responsible with item validation. They were asked to analyze the items proposed by the research team and express their opinion on content validity.

5.3. Research procedure

The questionnaire was applied in February 2018, before the start of teaching the discipline Psycho-pedagogical strategies for talent promotion. The time interval needed to fill in the entire questionnaire that implied a detailed analysis required by elaborating the answers was ensured. The master students have given their consent to participate in the research, ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of the information they have provided us.

5.4. Research design

To systematize the way we structure and conduct our research, we have condensed all the essential data in Table 02:

Table 02. Study design

RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
OS1, OS4	OS3, OS4	OS2
I1, I4,I5	I3, I4,I5	I2, I4,I5

6. Findings

To highlight the results, we shall analyse the master students' answers and group them according to our research questions. Regarding SO4 and items 4, 5, we shall perform a single final analysis, as the answers obtained correlate with all the research questions.

6.1. Results related to RQ1/SO1/I1

To analyze data related to RQ1, there were calculated the frequency and percentage of the master students' answers to Item 1 – Are you familiar with the syntagma of psycho-pedagogical strategies for talent promotion? (yes, no). If yes, what do you think it means? According to the results obtained for the first part of item 1, it can be noticed that 50.70% of the master students do not know the meaning of the concept of psycho-pedagogical strategies for talent promotion (Table 03). This proportion is sensitively equal to that of master students who know the meaning of this concept, 49.30%. In this case, we can assume that RQ1 cannot support the formulation of a value judgment as an answer to this question.

Table 03. Frequency and percentage of the master students' answers to Item 1

Results		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	Yes	35	49.30
	No	36	50.70
	Total	71	100

The solutions offered for the second part of the item allowed us to calculate the frequency of master students' answers regarding the general meaning of the concept of psycho-pedagogical strategies for the promotion of talents. The results indicate that out of the 35 master students who responded affirmatively, 21 (i.e. more than half) correctly appreciate that the term means a set of strategies to identify and promote gifted students. The other answers are relatively close to the appropriate approach to the concept but not the expected ones (e.g.: methods that help teachers to guide students n=3 students; learning strategies adapted to individual peculiarities of gifted students n=1; differentiated training strategies n=1). Also noteworthy is the high frequency of non-answers to this part of the item (n=10). Corroborating the two components of the answers obtained to this item in relation to RQ1/SO1, we can state that the master students, as teachers, are familiar with the theoretical issues of psycho-pedagogical strategies for promoting gifted students at a level that is not enough for them to carry out a high-quality activity with this segment of students. We may also say that during the initial psycho-pedagogical training as well as during the teaching and continuous training, the teachers did not have the opportunity to be sensitized or thoroughly acquainted with the field of psycho-pedagogical strategies for gifted students promotion.

6.2. Results related to RQ2/SO3/I3

To analyze RQ2 data, a qualitative and quantitative answer analysis was performed, response categories were identified and their frequency was calculated for Item 3 - Imagine a possible psycho-pedagogical strategy to promote giftedness at the level of education at which you teach. How the master students have related to this item in terms of quantity can be traced in Table 04.

Table 04. Frequency and percentage of the master students' answers for Item 3

Results		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	respondents	53	74.64
	non-respondents	18	25.35
	Total	71	100

The data show that almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the master students have a positive approach, based on the desire to express a personal point of view in relation to the item. The 53 respondents developed more answer alternatives than the number of respondents, some of them proposing several strategies (n=75). Table 05 shows answer distribution according to 2 criteria:

Table 05. Distribution, frequency and percentage of the solutions proposed by the master students for Item 3

Criterion	Answer versions/frequency	Percentage
degree of solution elaboration	56 elaborated answers	74.67
	19 brief answers	25.33
total	75	100
quality of solutions	50 specific answers	66.67
	25 non-specific answers	33.33
Total	75	100

Both our criteria were aimed at accuracy, complexity, adequacy, the degree of elaboration of the answer alternatives, i.e. qualitative criteria. The data above shows a predominance of the solutions specific to the issue under discussion (n=50), elaborated, detailed, exemplified (n=56). The difference of up to 75 answers is supplemented with, on the one hand, non-specific, general, vague, reductive or inaccurate solutions (n=25) and, on the other hand, very brief solutions (n=19).

We illustrate some of the answers offered by master students for the specific category of solutions: *The class teacher establishes a personal development program, an enriched curriculum that the student attends after classes, in a non-formal setting; the possibility to be admitted to a higher level of education based on the demonstrated talent; re-writing the framework plan at the level of primary education to offer the possibility of courses that may be attended only by gifted students; the implementation of a pilot program in all pre-university schools with clear objectives in this respect.*

To the same effect, we exemplify the answer alternatives provided by master students for non-specific solutions: *School-Community Partnerships; The communicative interaction that needs to be established between school and community is shaped as a network of human resource areas in which each undertakes a certain perspective to support the child in his/her ability, emotional and behavioral development; A possible talent promotion strategy at the educational institution where I teach could be to promote talented students from low income families who cannot develop their talent due to financial and material shortages by offering scholarships, allocating the resources needed for that activity and supporting them to promote their talent; or, more succinct solutions(optional, role-playing).*

6.3. Results related to RQ3/SO2/I2

To analyse the data referring to RQ3, the frequency and the percentage of the master students' answers to Item 2 were calculated – Do you believe that the current Romanian school stimulates talent promotion strategies through its current approaches? (yes, no). a) If Yes, please highlight a talent-promotion way/activity; b) If NO, please highlight 3 causes. A qualitative analysis was performed for the results collected for sub-items a and b of the item. According to the data obtained from the closed component of item 2, we find that a large proportion of the master students, more than 3 quarters, namely 70.42%, consider that the present Romanian school does not currently stimulate the use of the psycho-pedagogical strategies for the promotion of gifted students (Table 06).

Table 06. Frequency and percentage of the master students' answers to Item 2

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	Yes	21	29.58
	No	50	70.42
	total	71	100

a. The master students who responded affirmatively (n=21, 29.58%) had distinct approaches to highlighting the ways/activities by which the Romanian school stimulates gifted students promotion strategies through its approaches: two thirds of them (n=14) elaborated detailed answers, whereas a third (n=7) did not provide details.

They have been able to significantly highlight combined non-formal and formal ways of promoting talents: building workshops/circles for discovering and promoting gifted students, including guidance to participate in extracurricular activities, staging and performing theatre plays with talented students, or conducting celebrations/festivals (Children's Palace, School Otherwise) (n=20); developing individualized and differentiated curriculum (including optional disciplines) (n=14); student participation in different competitions (n=13); organizing groups/classes of high-skilled students, centres of excellence (n=11); implementation of pilot projects or pilot programs for the valorisation of talent by the County School Inspectorate, educational partnerships with different institutions (n=10); the use of active teaching methods (role play) and innovative educational means specific to different talents (n=10); building skills through personal projects; participation in various workshops, symposiums, works exhibitions, participation in various radio and television programs (n=7).

b. The master students who said that the current Romanian school does not stimulate through its approaches the gifted students promotion strategies have identified a series of causes of this situation. We present them in descending order of their frequencies: low level of teacher training in the field, lack of specialized courses (n=16); overloading school syllabi (n=12); lack of financial resources or low possibilities of self-financing (n=11); lack of interest from educational policy representatives (n=10); insufficient time (n=8); lack of material resources (n=7); lack of interest/motivation from teachers to identify students with high abilities (n=7); the large number of students in a class (n=6). A systematization of these categories of causes correlated with their frequency shows that the master students appreciate that most of the causes are of an objective nature, originating in the area of decision-makers in the field of educational policies and the curriculum for the initial teacher training stage. Other causes are of a personal, subjective natures also, some causes concern both the system and the teacher. It can be appreciated that the respondents identified some of the real causes that limit and/or hinder the use and capitalization of these strategies. However, they do not know or have not been able to operationalize real issues that facilitate the capitalization of these strategies in our current education system, such as: the existence of legal regulations, for example Law no. 17/2007 on the education of gifted young people, capable to achieve high performance; Law no. 189/2009 for the approval of GEO no. 141/2008 amending Law no. 17/2007; the specifications in Law no.1/2011; the freedom offered by the curriculum at the school's decision or the differentiated lesson design.

Corroborating the two components of the answers obtained for Item 2 in relation to RQ3/SO2 as well as the frequency of the answers formulated, we consider that the master students, in their capacity as

teachers, are minimally acquainted with the actual contextual, concrete application of the psycho-pedagogical strategies for the promotion of talents in the Romanian system education, and there are sufficient dimensions unapproached by them.

6.4. Results related to RQ1, RQ2, RQ3/O1, SO2, O3, SO4/ I4, I5

To analyze SO4 data, we collected and analyzed the data provided by Item 4 and Item 5. For Item 4 - *What are your expectations regarding the course you are going to attend, Psycho-pedagogical strategies for promoting talent?* the frequency and percentage of the responses were calculated. A relevant number of master students have formulated expectations for the announced course (n=66.93%) while the number and percentage of non-respondents is relatively small (n=5.7%).

Out of the 66 answers received, 29 answers were elaborate and included arguments; 20 answers were concise, correct and contained at least two pertinent opinions; 17 had a formal and undetailed style.

According to their content, the answers can be grouped as follows: Answers centered on the cognitive domain (n=26) that express interest in the accumulation of knowledge that master students intend to use in the classroom and in non-formal activities for the personal development of students. For example: *We expect to learn about innovative gifted promotion strategies because we do not know too much about this area; ... learning working strategies that focus on gifted children.* The next category of answers (n=17) refers to the need for specialization in the identification of gifted children (GC), in relation to whom *I expect to learn some talent-finding/recognition tools; to know the ways of recognizing/discovering talented students.* The third category of answers (n=14) converges towards the need for new working strategies in the classroom with GC, moral support strategies for GC, appropriate instrumentation for the phases of work with GC: *I would like to receive guidance on discovering good talent promotion strategies through concrete examples that have been implemented by other schools and have been successful.* The last category of systematized answers (n=7) is strictly centered on strategies for identifying and capitalizing high-skilled students: *I want to learn how to identify my students' talents, how to channel them to capitalize on them; The course is new for me, so it would be useful to find out what formal or non-formal activities we can carry out to promote young talents, which are the exploration and cultivation opportunities from which they may benefit (I refer to the time allocated, workspace, available tools/materials and, why not, the possibility for me to attend such courses, with or without transferable credits, to help me become a specialized teacher/mentor for gifted young people.* Two master students want to carry out projects in psycho-pedagogy for highly-gifted children (PPHGC), other answers had a non-specific and uncorrelated character in relation to the PPHGC theme: *to learn something new, to acquire more information,* and 2 study participants did not provide answers to this item. As can be seen, the number of respondents, the set of answers as well as the 4 systematized categories allow us to appreciate that there is a high and adequate level of expectations of the master students regarding the course, which could function as a powerful motivational resort both in the learning process as well as for the professional development of master students.

For Item 5 - *I would like to know more about this area (yes, no)* we have obtained the results systematized in Table 7.

Table 07. Frequency and percentage of master students for Item 5

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	respondents	67	94.3%
	yes/ no	66/1	
	non-respondents	4	5.7%
	total	71	100

The data show a great desire of the master students to learn news, to update their training in this area, a good indicator of interest, curiosity and intrinsic motivation.

By reference to RQ1, RQ2, RQ3/O1, SO2, O3, the data obtained and analysed previously in Items 4 and 5 contributes to the formulation of more complete and more substantiated RQ responses as well as to the achievement of the objectives

7. Conclusion

The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the answers is relevant to the need for a minimal initial/continuous training in the psycho-pedagogy of high abilities (PPHA) for teachers. Although half of them say they are familiar with this issue, the answers provided indicate serious shortcomings, confusions, extrapolations, inaccuracies. Therefore, for RQ1, our answer is rather negative, following the correlation of the data obtained here with the data from the other research questions. The respondents are interested in the topic, engage in formulating answers, strive to develop the required strategies. At the same time, their answers reveal a series of confusions, the tendency to address the problem either at a general and vague level, or restrictively, very narrowly, without making a fair discrimination between the concepts of promoting a high ability and non-formal/usually artistic activities through which some abilities may be exploited. Very few of the strategies listed/proposed by the master students were novel, most of them being references to interactive, heuristic methods used in the teaching process, or to specific methods of non-formal education. Thus, for RQ2, RQ3, our response is positive, but at relatively average level: numerous and thorough training approaches are required, directed towards the psycho-pedagogy of talent promotion.

The data obtained support the need for changes in educational policies and a need to apply consistently and realistically the legislative provisions regulating the field of PPHG in our country. Although there are several special regulations for this field, the teachers participating in the study have very little information about them, their answers comprising almost no reference to them. These aspects correlate, on the one hand, with the moment of the study (prior to the course on this issue in the Masters Program in Innovative Strategies in Education) and with the necessity of introducing this course in any academic curriculum in the fields of psychology, pedagogy.

These aspects correlate with the moment of the study (prior to the course on this issue from the Master study program on Innovative Strategies in Education) as well as with the necessity of introducing this course in any academic curriculum in the fields of psychology, pedagogy.

Beyond the legal framework specific to the PPHA area, under the pretext of lack of time, lack of additional financial allocations specific to PPHA needs, educators find it difficult to customize, individualize or adapt the curricula to achieve differentiated education.

So, it means that the identification and nurturing of gifted students is a very difficult task for teachers without specific training. Beyond the legal, scientific and psychological aspects, teachers need to work at the same time on themselves: to engage in critical self-analysis and experience cognitive dissonance in order to perform in activities with gifted students.

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